

My Freshman Year

What a Professor Learned
by Becoming a Student

Rebekah Nathan



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Welcome to “AnyU”

Ten years ago, I would never have expected to be writing a book about college life at AnyU. I am a cultural anthropologist, and have spent most of my professional life living overseas in a remote village location (unnamed to preserve *all* our anonymity), learning the language and customs of another culture. As a traditional cultural anthropologist, I participated in and observed village life over a period of many years, joining village organizations, interviewing locals, and establishing long-term personal relationships. I wrote “ethnography,” or descriptive accounts of the day-to-day life of a people, hoping to capture the intimate dynamics of social life and culture change. It is quite a leap from life in a village to life in the dorms, but perhaps I can offer a little explanation of how this book came about.

Anyone who has spent much time overseas knows that this experience makes you reconsider your own culture. You become an observer of what was once just lived. On your return from another world, things once unnoticed—our reliance on date books, for instance—seem glaring; what was a daily routine can resurface as an exotic American custom. Since my time overseas, I find myself constantly taking apart the taken-for-granted world in which I live, a penchant I eventually developed into a course on American culture. In it, I direct my stu-

dents to look at their own culture with an anthropologist's eye, to reexamine its issues and its perplexities with the same sense of freshness and compassion and relativity they would bring to another culture. I decided to take my own advice as I thought about my academic experience.

After more than fifteen years of university teaching, I found that students had become increasingly confusing to me. Why don't undergraduates ever drop by for my office hours unless they are in dire trouble in a course? Why don't they respond to my (generous) invitations to do out-of-class research under my guidance? How could some of my students never take a note during my big lecture class? And what about those students who bring whole meals and eat and drink during class? Or those other students who seem to feel absolutely no embarrassment in putting their head or their feet on their desk and taking a nap during class?

I found myself laughing along with Carolyn Segal's tongue-in-cheek article about student excuses for late work and missed classes, including the ubiquitous "my roommate was throwing up blood."¹ I saw considerable truth in another published lament by a Duke University professor, who questioned the quality of undergraduate education even at his elite institution.²

I began to notice my own and colleagues' discourse as we continually tried to make sense of what seemed bizarre behavior. Were we like that? Are students today different? Doesn't it seem like they're . . . cheating more? ruder? less motivated? more steeped in their own sense of entitlement? Why is the experience of leading class discussions sometimes like pulling teeth? Why won't my students read the assigned readings so we can have a decent class discussion? The list goes on, despite the fact that we had other stories, too, of students hungry to learn, of "aha!" experiences, and of letters of thanks that arrived two years after a course ended.

Students' attitudes about their education had special significance to me in light of the student-centered mantras of contemporary universities. Professors across the country increasingly

hear university administrators who speak like corporate managers, who believe that they are competing in an educational marketplace for student-consumers. Beyond making housing, registration, and like matters more student-friendly, university administrators are changing the nature of course delivery, pedagogy, scheduling, and degree offerings to address students' tastes and desires and thereby draw more applicants. In this climate, what students want and how they understand their education are becoming more central to the shape of the modern university.

A final impetus for this research came when I sat in on a couple of colleagues' courses that I had long wanted to audit informally. With the permission of the instructors, I attended a computer programming class and a class in Buddhism, courses obviously quite different in their content and in the students attracted to them. I came to class regularly, took notes, and did the readings, although I skipped the papers, tests, and other evaluative measures. In retrospect, I suppose that behaviors such as writing in a spiral notebook, raising my hand to ask a question, and sitting in class waiting for the instructor to arrive marked me as a student, even if I was an old one. To my surprise, I began to hear a new discourse as I was engaged by other students in conversation:

"Psst . . . psst . . . , excuse me . . . were you in class on Friday? Listen, I cut out and went skiing. Can I borrow your notes?"

"Hey, do you know what he said was going to be on the test? I was zoned out while he was telling us."

"Do you think it's fair that we have both the essay and the test in one week?"

It dawned on me soon enough that I had gone through the looking glass, so to speak, and I was now privy to a world that my students typically didn't share with me. I heard about weekend parties, and how someone wrote the paper drunk between 3 and 4:30 in the morning, and how unfair the grading was, and why did we have to take so many liberal studies courses anyway? The discourse I began to hear happened naturally in my shared status as student, and the difference in the

content, formality, and tone of the dialogues struck me. I found myself writing down little snippets in my course notebook to remind myself after class of the conversation topics. "I mean, when are you ever gonna use Nietzsche at a cocktail party?" was one of my first notations from someone who obviously didn't feel that a philosophy course was worth the time.

I realized that I was starting to do ethnography, and to look at my experience with an anthropologist's eye; it was then that the idea of actually becoming a student occurred to me as a research project for my sabbatical year. My interest in American culture, in the changing American university, and in the undergraduate student culminated in a research proposal to study, as a freshman, at my own university. The research questions I formulated were general: What is the current culture at AnyU (my pseudonym for my university) as an example of the American public university? How do contemporary American students understand their education, and what do they want from it? How do they negotiate university life? What does college really teach?

I am not the first to undertake such a project. Michael Moffatt, also an anthropologist and a professor, wrote a valuable ethnography of undergraduate life at Rutgers University, which I often incorporate in my American culture course. In many ways it served as a historical reference point for what I witnessed in 2002–3. Moffatt conducted his fieldwork between 1977 and 1987, with literally a different generation of students, and his accounts—along with other important literature, such as Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz's history of campus life and Dorothy Holland and Margaret Eisenhart's investigation of women in college—provided me with a helpful foundation for assessing change and continuity in student culture.³

I thought, too, that I might bring a new slant to earlier work. As a woman, I expected that my purview would be decidedly different from Moffatt's male gaze on college life, with its heavy emphasis on sexuality. As a reader, you will find that some topics, such as Greek life, dating and sexuality, parents and students, commuters, and athletics, receive short shrift.⁴ It

is not that these subjects are unimportant to undergraduate culture; rather, I highlight topics that engage the classic notions we have of "the university" as a world of ideas, as a residential place where diversity and community and integrity are nurtured. I wanted to see how student culture articulates with the institution of the American university, including the vision we have of it, its mission, and its future.

To do this, I draw more heavily on the "participant" in participant-observer research than in earlier ethnography, where researchers, though they similarly relied on student interviews and observations for their data, were self-identified as professors.⁵ I opted for a more daily immersion, in which I actually took courses, lived in the dorms, and encountered students as an older but fellow student.

In the spring of 2002 I applied to my own university as a student with an undeclared major, using only my high school transcripts as evidence of my education. I was accepted shortly afterward and began receiving "Welcome to AnyU" letters with information packets about financing my education, meal plans, and dormitory living, the summer "Previews" program that all freshmen were required to attend, and optional summer rafting and hiking trips I might want to join before school started.

After some reflection about my options, I decided it was best to "get with the program," following as closely as I could the student script for the first year. I opted, as most freshmen do, for a campus meal plan and on-campus dormitory housing; I signed up for a centrally located coed dormitory, consisting mostly of nineteen- and twenty-year-olds, although I requested and received a single room on my floor.⁶ I sent in my forms to attend the two-day Previews session, where freshmen arrive—usually with their parents—to receive an orientation to college life prior to the start of classes. I also planned to arrive on campus a week before classes began to participate in "Welcome Week" activities for new and returning students. After hesitantly peeling my faculty parking sticker off my car and shelving

ing my faculty ID, I prepared to enter my new status as a first-year student.

How I Would Represent Myself

The undergraduate application process, with its requirement that I list all schools attended and degrees received,⁷ had begun a delicate balancing act between truth and fiction about my life. It was clear to me that if I entered student life announcing that I was a professor, I would compromise some of my purpose in doing this project. I wanted to see what college life was like as a student, albeit a "returning"⁸ older student, and to relate to other students and to faculty members as a student rather than as a professor and researcher. At the same time, my commitment as an anthropologist is to refrain from misrepresenting myself to the people within the culture I am studying.

My friends and colleagues helped me wrestle with my problem of identity, asking, "What will you say if someone asks you what you do for a living?"

"Can't I say I'm not working now—that I'm a student?" I responded, thinking that this was true even if it wasn't the whole truth.

"Yes," a colleague agreed, "but what if they ask what you did before?"

"I'll tell them I've done many things—which I have. I can say that I'm a writer, among other things, because I still get royalties from my last book."

"But what if they say, 'What other things?'" one colleague pressed.

"Well, I hope they don't ask me that, but I guess I'd have to tell them that I teach and do research."

Friends, role-playing as students, continually engaged me in mock dialogues: So what's your major? "I'm undeclared." What's your hometown? "I was born and bred in New York." Why did you come to AnyU? "I wanted to see what college was like, because I'm a writer as well as a student, and this univer-

sity was close to home. Besides, I love the town, the mountains, the outdoors here." All true, I reasoned.

As it turned out, my exercises in identity were largely moot. In daily conversations no one (with one exception, to whom I spilled all) ever asked me directly about my life. Two student friends confided to me later that they thought it was a little sad for an older woman like myself to be living in the dorms, and didn't want to ask me questions for fear that there was a horrific divorce story attached.

In formal interviews I always kept strictly to research protocol. I identified myself as a researcher doing a project on undergraduate life who intended to publish her results. I provided informants with a written description of the project and its goals, and asked for their signed permission to conduct an interview. Many of my informants also knew me as a fellow student, though, and I suspect that they thought my research goals and my intentions to publish my results were a combination of wishful thinking and academic bravado. I discuss the ramifications of disclosure and identity on my research in the afterword, "Ethics and Ethnography."

Enter the Abyss

My first real immersion in student life came in June of 2002, when I attended summer Previews, required for all incoming freshmen. Previews was an intensive two-day event that included an overnight stay at one of the premier freshman dorms. Freshmen were told to provide a sleeping bag, towel, and pillow for their dorm room, where they would be housed with another freshman. Bedding was provided for parents, who were to sleep in different wings of the same building.

I arrived at 8 AM to register outside the lobby of the large freshman dorm. I had thought carefully about how I would dress, and I showed up "consciously casual" in denim shorts and a golf shirt, baseball cap (bring a hat, we were advised), athletic socks, and not-too-new sneakers. Like the other fresh-

men, I carried my sleeping bag and pillow and overnight bag awkwardly as I stood in line waiting to get my key and my roommate assignment. "Excuse me, ma'am," said the blond ponytailed upperclassman working the intake desk, "parents go over there." She pointed. "No," I answered with an understanding smile. "I'm not a parent, I'm a freshman." I looked in the direction of her finger to see a group of waiting parents in the lobby, more than half of them wearing denim or athletic shorts, a collared golf-type shirt, baseball cap, and sneakers with athletic socks. The students wore flip-flops, jeans, and short T-shirts. It was already clear that my cultural acumen was flawed.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she said. "That's so cool that you're coming to Previews! Well, then, you'll be rooming with Jennifer," and she pointed to the similarly blond ponytailed woman in front of me in line, who turned out to be a prospective health sciences major from Houston. I saw a look of what I considered to be controlled panic cross her face, but she quickly recovered to give me a smile and a greeting. I did feel bad for this poor freshman who drew the old lady for her first roommate, but I found that we could carry on a reasonable conversation about our majors, why we picked AnyU, and the two-day program.

During the next two days I discovered a number of things I never knew about my university. I attended information sessions on meal plans, registering for classes, how to get tutoring and advising help, different tuition payment options, and how to budget our time. There was a walking mall of tables for new students, highlighting services and groups on campus. As a new student, I was overwhelmed; as a professor, I was surprised to see how three particular spheres—sororities and fraternities, religious organizations, and commercial services, including credit cards and phone services—dominated the scene and vied for student attention. As an anthropologist, I was humbled to see how little I, as a professor, knew of my students' academic world.

Besides informational sessions, which parents and students attended together, the formal Previews program offered a num-

ber of icebreakers, upperclassman skits, and discussion sessions attended just by students. I stood in circles of students where we threw beanbags and learned individual names by calling the name of the person to whom we tossed the bag. We watched numerous cautionary student skits—on AIDS, on date rape, on drinking—and were asked to reflect on a number of social circumstances we might encounter in school: What if you had a gay roommate who put a pink triangle on the door? Which scenario did you think was worse, a wheelchair-bound student denied access to a second-floor dorm room or an African American student always being asked by the teacher to tell the class what blacks think?

Despite the great variety of planned activities, there was a curious sameness to many of them. As an anthropologist, I saw a "script" in these introductory experiences. First we were confronted with a controversial, usually emotionally engaging issue. Then we were asked, often in a small group, to reflect on what we thought about the issue or what we personally would do in those circumstances. Group leaders expected us to express our thoughts individually on the matter at hand, with the reminder to the group that "everyone is entitled to their view." The upshot was that the group listened politely while all of us, no matter what thought we voiced, shared our opinions. The exercise ended, without dialogue or interaction, when the last person had spoken. In this style of intellectual discourse I noticed some of the themes I would encounter throughout my undergraduate experience. More important, I could begin to see the repeated (and, after a while, anticipatable) elements of the experience that marked shared understandings and cultural elements.

Welcome Week: Life in Another Culture

I moved into my dorm room on a Saturday in August, the first day that students were allowed to take possession of their rooms. The following week was designated "Welcome Week,"

a time when students participate in optional social, sports, and orientation activities prior to the start of classes. Printed calendars of events, along with informal flyers, posters that hung from the lobby rafters, and tiny strips of paper that appeared regularly under my door announced a plethora of dorm events and university activities that competed for student attention.

The calendar for Welcome Week was listed by the hour—touch football game on the quad at 2; time management workshop on north campus at 3:30; an ice cream social at 7 in the dorm lobby—and there were RAs (resident assistants) reminding residents of the next activity and urging them to join in. The resident assistants had been on campus for more than a week preparing for the new students, making posters, designing dorm activities, and crafting decorative name tags for each resident's door. RAs were upperclassmen who received free room and board and a stipend to serve as peer counselors for a given wing or floor as well as local law enforcers for the residence halls. During this introductory week, they served as cheerleaders, encouraging incoming students to "get involved," and were the only people who knew our names: "Rebekah, will you be coming to the ice cream social?" "Hey, Rebekah, don't forget the movie tonight—free popcorn!"

The schedule was designed so that new students would choose from various activities, meet new people, and learn to negotiate the college campus. I joined as many activities as I could. As I began Welcome Week, I knew that I had started formal "fieldwork," but I had never quite anticipated how similar my entrance into college life would seem to my prior fieldwork in a remote village.

As a full-time faculty member for fourteen years, as well as a member of the faculty senate and other campus-wide organizations, I thought I was thoroughly familiar with my home institution. I knew all the shortcuts, both geographically and bureaucratically, for negotiating the campus and was completely comfortable with that knowledge. It came as a surprise, then, to discover after moving into the dorms that I was completely dis-

oriented, much as when I arrived in the village where I first did my overseas fieldwork.

Our first week's calendar called for freshmen to attend a number of events all across campus. The campus, though, had taken on an entirely new physical appearance to me. As a professor, I was used to having my classes built around my *own* location, usually in or close to the anthropology building on the southern end of campus. When I needed to cross campus, I was accustomed to traveling by car—from faculty parking lot to faculty parking lot. I always entered buildings by the door closest to the parking lot and had a sort of "street-eye" view of the campus world.

Many campus buildings have a "street side" and a "walking mall" side. The mall side offers grassy areas and trees, benches with a few picnic tables, as well as walking and bicycle paths. As a student, I had a student parking permit. I was allowed to park in only one area of campus, near my dorm, and then had to walk or use the campus bus system to get to other areas of campus. From my new purview, the buildings and general geography looked completely different to me, so much so that I could not tell exactly where I was on campus, much less identify the building or door I was supposed to find. I could not locate the bookstore or the health clinic or the international student office, all buildings I thought I knew. Moreover, I was being asked to find offices and buildings I wasn't used to finding: the garage from which to get your rented refrigerator; the freshman advising office; the seminar room of the Hotel and Restaurant Management School. This was not my home turf.

I became one of many freshmen whom upperclassmen answered with patience: "Take the 3 Bus and get off at the Union." Or "Follow the walking path to the end and the building is on the left." I was shocked at how vulnerable and out of my element I felt. I found myself frequently wandering in the wrong direction and stopping other students, who looked more competent, for directions. I genuinely felt the part of a new student, or at least a clueless outsider.

My sense of cluelessness reached a peak on my second night in the dorm. I had just finished a dorm volleyball game played in the afternoon sun, and I was hot, thirsty, and hungry in that order. I showered in one of the four stalls provided for the seventy women on the floor, made myself a quick stir-fry in the first-floor communal kitchen, and broke open a cold beer from my rented mini-refrigerator. I brought my meal and drink into the second-floor lounge, putting both on one of the two round tables in the room.

I proceeded to eat and drink, as I watched CNN, and as other students—including my RA—wandered in and out of the lounge. About ten minutes into my meal, the lounge door burst open and, in what seemed a storm trooper-style raid, four RAs descended on me. "Do you realize that you cannot have alcoholic beverages in here?" the head RA demanded gruffly.

"No, I'm so sorry," I stammered. "I thought that this dorm allowed alcohol."

"Please give me your ID," she ordered, and as she wrote down my name and student ID number on a pad, she explained that residents may drink in the dorms if they're over twenty-one but not in public areas. You must be in your own room with the door closed. This was all in my student handbook, which I'd been given earlier in the week and should have read, and even if I hadn't, I was responsible for knowing what was in it. They would get back to me about disciplinary measures.

However embarrassed I was to be cited within forty-eight hours of starting the semester, my RA raid was curiously reminiscent of a famous ethnographic incident, and it buoyed my spirits. The incident occurred in Bali, where the anthropologist Clifford Geertz found himself running from the scene of an illegal cockfight that was raided by the police, scattering and hiding with other attendees. In Geertz's case, this proved to be his entrée into a community that had been wary of his presence: the villagers finally trusted him when they saw him running too. I hoped my drinking debacle would serve the same function for me.

There were other unexpected elements as well that reminded me of doing overseas fieldwork. One of these was language. In her study of student language, Connie Eble (1996) found that in a seven-year span (1980–87), only 10 percent of a college slang lexicon remained in use, and over fifteen years (1972–87), only four out of two hundred words stayed the same. I saw very quickly from the banter of the first week that I did not have my lingo straight, and that to increase rapport, I would have to master the current speech conventions. "Hooked up," for example, was a rough equivalent of 1970s "shacked up," and certain expressions were liberally peppered throughout most conversations, including "sweet," "lame," "awesome," "oh my god! oh my god!" "like" (e.g., "If I was to . . . like . . . go to class, I would . . . like . . . fall asleep"), and "totally!" among many others. These particular terms would likely change again within a few years, but for now they were important badges of in-group identity.⁹

There was also the speed of conversation. I didn't notice it much when a dorm mate spoke directly to me, but I found that when I was listening at the fringes of an interacting group, I sometimes had to strain to understand the conversation. It was as if they were using a different dialect of English—the way an American might feel overhearing a group of Welshmen speaking English informally. You sort of understand, but you can't catch every word. I often wished I had a transcript of the conversations that went by me in the dorms. The dialogue was so much faster than what I was used to speaking or hearing, and interestingly, it was quite a different speech style from my conversations with students as a professor.

As had been the case in my overseas world, sports played a positive role in my social acceptance into the dorm. In the first weeks of fieldwork, before I could speak much of the local language, life was very lonely in the village. When you can speak only a few words of a language, people tend to limit their interactions with you or treat you as a mental defective. Then I discovered that there was a Ping-Pong table at the local rectory and a regular contingent of teens to thirty-year-olds who

showed up to play. I have always been a good athlete, and it was through Ping-Pong that I made my first friends and impressions; it provided one of the few venues where I could show my intelligence, through strategy or cleverness, or where we could share the emotion of a heated rally or close miss. Villagers saw me as a person when I played with them, as opposed to when I talked with them.

Touch football and volleyball played a similar role in my first week in the dorms. That I played at all, at five foot two, 115 pounds, and fifty-plus years, surprised the RAs and my hall mates. That I caught three passes helped cut through the stereotypes of the "older female student." I noticed more joking with me afterward. RAs made a point of telling me when an informal game of something or other was being organized outside. One student invited me to come to the new intramural rugby club for women. (I declined, fearing for my life, but appreciated the invitation.) Others had a new basis for saying a word or two to me in the hall, and vice versa.

I was feeling pretty good about my first whirlwind week of activities in school and the possibilities for full acceptance on my hall. I was acclimating well, I thought, to the late-night hours of the dorm and the loud chatter of conversation and music that permeated the halls. It was about midnight, almost a week after I moved into the dorm, and I was sitting in my room at my computer in pajamas with my back to my open door. A woman's voice came from behind me: "Excuse me, I'm looking for room 443. Can you tell me which direction?" I turned around to help her, now proudly familiar with the layout of my dorm, and she blurted, "Oh . . . sorry! I didn't know you were a mom," and proceeded to walk to the next open door.

That incident presaged a number of similar "mom" occasions, when people assumed in bizarre situations (such as at an underground rock concert or as I was walking out of class with a backpack on and pen in hand) that I was the mother of the person next to me. My old age assigned me to a niche, just as my nationality and young age had caused villagers where I once worked as an anthropologist to see me as a "Peace Corps."

No matter how good my local language skills became and how comfortable I was in my own resident village, I was always a Peace Corps worker to natives new or distant to me. The same proved true in the dorms. While I found that I felt close to being an equal in hands-on task situations—class projects, study groups, or sports—social situations were quite another story. To the students I didn't know well, including most of the men and women on my dorm floor, I was a very much older woman who, despite getting busted for drinking, was never really one of them.

My student life lasted an academic year, and the mainstay of this book is based on my participation in and observation of undergraduate life—both my own and others'—over the course of that year. Let me be clear about one thing, though. My personal experiences as a middle-aged woman cannot say anything directly about "the undergraduate experience." I am not eighteen years old, not subject to the same pushes and pulls of that age group nor privy to their social interactions. As anthropologists learn in their overseas experience, one can never really "go native" or expect that one's own experience is indicative of the experience of others born in the culture. At the same time, it is the experience of living village life that offers the insight and vantage point needed to ask relevant questions and understand the context of the answers given. It is this that I hoped to accomplish by becoming a freshman.

The pages that follow are informed by several types of data. In addition to national education studies and local surveys at my own university, I conducted forty formal interviews with American and international students, two focus groups (one with freshmen and one with seniors), and several "mini-studies," including activity diaries completed by students about the use of their time, a five-month monitoring study of who (based on gender and perceived ethnicity) eats with whom in the student dining areas, a study of residential mobility, a descriptive weekly diary of all formal program activities conducted in my dorm, and a survey of informal conversation topics.

As a participant-observer I concentrated, as many freshmen do in their first semester, on learning the ropes, meeting other students, getting acclimated to the dorm, trying out student clubs, and discovering what it took to do my academic work. I spent every day and night of the week at the dorm, taking a full load of five undergraduate courses that ranged across the curriculum. Like other students, I went "home" only on the occasional weekend night or during holidays. I consciously chose a wide variety of courses, from modern languages to business and engineering, and professors whom I did not personally know (figuring that, if I didn't know them, they would not know me). My name appeared on the roster as that of a first-year student who had not yet decided on a major.

As most fieldworkers would do when starting a field project, I began by mapping the physical space of the dorm and did a "census" of my dorm wing. I listed all the public notices, advertisements, and flyers that were officially posted on the walls and bathroom stalls and noted the sayings, objects, and pictures that adorned individual dorm room doors facing public space. I kept descriptive records of dorm meetings, events, and incidents, as well as daily fieldnotes about my personal experiences, observations, and conversations.

During the second semester, when I was more actively engaged in formal student interviews and mini-study observations, I quietly dropped my class load down to two courses to accommodate my active research agenda, and spent several nights per week at my home computer, showing up back at the dorm most days after my early morning class. During both semesters I was the floor volunteer responsible for "graffiti questions" in the women's bathrooms, a sort of college female convention whereby a question is posted in each toilet stall with blank paper and a pen. The bathroom users respond anonymously, often posing new questions, and writing retorts to one another's responses. This became a constant source of comment and interaction about student issues and interests.

This book has the ambitious goal of describing "the undergraduate experience." In a strictly statistical sense this is impossible,

because no school will be representative of all others, and even at one school no set of experiences or interviews can stand exactly for all others. At last count, in fact, there were more than 4,100 accredited institutions of higher learning leading to the bachelor's degree in the United States, and considerable variety within that educational pool. Given this diversity, what can one person's experience and research at a single school say about undergraduate life?

For one thing, AnyU, a public university with more than ten thousand students, is probably a reasonable representative of the places where most U.S. college students go to school. While the big university represents only 11 percent of the campuses across the country, it enrolls 51 percent of all college students.¹⁰ Like most institutions in this "Big U" category, AnyU is a public doctoral-granting university offering a full spectrum of undergraduate majors and a respectable education at relatively reasonable cost. You would not find it listed in the top tiers of *U.S. News and World Report's* "Best Universities," and as a non-elite state university, it draws its student body predominantly, but not exclusively, from within the state.

Still, AnyU's reputation for undergraduate education—including the presence of professors (not graduate students) in the classroom, a residential campus, and smaller-than-usual classes for a Big U—attracts a formidable pool of freshmen, the majority of whom ranked in the top quarter of their high school class. AnyU therefore seems solidly in the middle of the American college system, and should be familiar to many U.S. college students, though not identical to their experience.¹¹

In making the case for AnyU, I also want to speak to you, the reader, as an anthropologist would. Anthropologists believe that the very nature of a culture is that it is something both learned and shared by others. Any person in my overseas village could tell you when it was time to plant, just as any American could tell you that you should stand up for the national anthem. Although many aspects of culture are contested—Should abortion be legal? Should English be the official U.S. language? Should gay people marry?—the conflict itself is often a recognizable aspect of the cultural scene. Because of

this, I can write an entire book centering on one family from one village undergoing change, yet find that many other people from that country (several of whom have written me) recognize their own stories in its pages.

The same is true of the American public college. Even though colleges vary widely in their missions and student bodies, almost any American college student should be able to confirm that many students regularly sleep until noon or later, that classmates typically try to avoid Friday classes, that the first row in a lecture hall will fill up last, or that underage students drink secretly. Granted there are some students who get up early, a few who prefer the first row or who do not drink while they are underage, but these are cultural actors too, who are probably aware that they are contesting or flouting norms.

It is through the intimate and everyday experiences of college—revealed to me through interviews and participant-observation—that I aim to describe college culture. I contextualize what I see and comment on its content from several vantage points, including my outlook as a professor, the views of foreign students, and the insights provided by national surveys of college life. But the ultimate test of my analysis will be undergraduate students, who can decide for themselves if they recognize their lives and their world in this book.

CHAPTER 2

Life in the Dorms

Walking down the dorm corridor to find my room for the first time, I was struck most by the sheer amount of “stuff.” Rooms and corridors were piled high with clothes, appliances, bedding, furniture, and countless boxes. As the clutter cleared during the day and rooms assumed their final appearance, it was hard to believe how many things had been squeezed into a ten-by-twenty-foot space.

I had personally made several shopping trips to stock my dorm room, and had moved in a few carloads of items, but my room—with its computer, lamp, night table, ten-inch TV, microwave oven, wok, books, comforter, and two posters—was bare compared with those of my younger compatriots. In addition to articles like mine, they had joysticks, couches, mountain bikes, ski and sports equipment, guitars and keyboards, large and elaborate sound systems, multiple-layered electronics shelves holding TVs, VCRs, DVD players, refrigerators, tables, cabinets, floor and pole lamps, overstuffed throw pillows, as well as coffeemakers, slow cookers, and illegal sandwich grills. What’s more, many rooms had duplicates of every appliance—dueling computers, TV sets, microwave ovens, stereo systems.

Each room contained two single beds, a small sink and mirror, a large built-in armoire, and a double desk running the width of the room with multiple drawers and bookshelves, but

almost all residents added creatively to the available storage space. There were hooks to hold bicycles that couldn't be left outside and under-the-bed containers for extra clothing. Some students bunked their beds to create space for their couches, beanbag chairs, electronics, and appliances; others placed their desk chairs on top of their desks to create floor space (I saw some do their homework up there as well). The rooms, built in the 1940s, literally could not hold all the items brought, and many residents built storage structures upward from floor to ceiling. Among the biggest differences in dorm room arrangement from my youth were lofts—elaborate wood frames that held a second-story platform over one's bed, creating another level of living and storage space.

Two people shared most rooms, with a few singles thrown in here and there. The geography, like the community, began with one's immediate wing, and then extended to one's corridor, floor, and finally dorm. The largest public spaces were on the ground floor and were communal for the entire dorm. A large lobby area with fireplace, lounge furniture, and television set greeted residents, with student newspapers, coupons, pizza delivery flyers, and activity calendars spread on a table for the taking. Depending on the day and the hour, student workers or resident assistants (RAs) staffed the front desk and were available from 8 AM to 10 PM for questions, problems, emergencies, and lending requests from the small video library. On this floor, too, there was a small communal kitchen, with a single stove, which served the entire building, as well as a computer lab open only at night and an exercise room, each the size of two dorm rooms.

My floor consisted of two contiguous male and female halls with a shared coed lounge area in between that housed a TV with VCR (but no DVD), two round tables with chairs, and a few overstuffed couches and chairs. The two female wings on each floor shared a same-sex bathroom, and the two male wings shared a second common bathroom. The female wings were slightly more populous, so approximately seventy women used four toilet stalls, four showers, and one bathtub.

Most mornings, before the start of popular 9–10 AM classes, there would be a line of women in bathrobes carrying plastic shower caddies with soap and shampoo, waiting for an open shower.

Resident assistants' rooms or suites were positioned strategically in high-traffic areas. There were three on my floor. You could tell their rooms by the animated decorations on their doors and wall spaces around their rooms. You might see a giant brightly colored name tag, a "Good luck with classes!" banner, or a door wrapped like a package, with a "Come on In" sign. The RA usually provided some way of knowing where he or she was at all times, with pointers indicating "eating out," "in class," "out and about," "studying—only emergencies," or "I'm there—knock." RA spaces, always busy with displays and messages, conveyed a kind of big brother or big sister authority, a mixture of law enforcement and availability, concern, and counsel.

Are We Having Fun Yet?

As I would do if I had moved into a village, I started my research by recording my immediate surroundings and taking a census of who lived where. There was a lot to record. Dorm doors, hallways, and bathrooms were filled with messages in the form of flyers, jokes, bulletin board displays, photos, and collages, all in their own way telling me something about the culture of the dorm.

Bulletin boards provided the official imagery of dorm life. There were several on each floor, and creating the displays was an important part of the RA's job. They were usually changed each month, so in a year's time one could see a healthy sample of topics and presentations. I typically wandered the halls on weekend mornings when they were reliably deserted because students were either sleeping or had left on Friday for a weekend adventure. By April of my second semester, I had recorded

fifty-seven different formal bulletin board displays in my residence hall.¹

It was clear that the bulletin boards were coordinated efforts, influenced by directives from the RHD (residence hall director); they rotated in a discernible pattern relating to the time of year and desired theme, although RAs had considerable leeway in deciding how a message appeared. At the beginning of the year the corridors all sported "get involved" messages as well as rape and sexual assault warnings. Mid-semester messages contained more academic advice but also focused on conflict resolution, roommate, and relationship problems. Around the December holidays, health and body image messages were more frequent, while around Valentine's Day was a profusion of boards relating to love, sex, and relationships. "Diversity" issues seemed relegated to the weeks surrounding the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday. I saw one board on voting preceding November elections.

Approximately one in five bulletin boards throughout the year concerned academics, and most of these offered tips and tools, including items such as "dealing with test anxiety" or "ten steps to academic success." The biggest category of displays—more than one-quarter—dealt with psychological and physical health, as well as threats to health. This category included four displays on sexual assault and sexually transmitted diseases, three on drugs and alcohol, and four on body image (for example, "Love your Lumps," urging us to accept our bodily imperfections).

Scattered comic relief boards that drew on college culture themes ("Fifty Things Admissions Never Told You about College," "Crazy Things to Do for under \$10," "Fifty Fun Things to Do at Wal-Mart") appeared throughout the year. Almost 20 percent of all messages had danger motifs, warning students about the consequences (suspension/expulsion, AIDS, jail, STDs, pregnancy, sickness, even death) that given actions would reap. In visiting the dorm the following year, I found that many of the boards were recycled, suggesting that this for-

mal culture—touting health, educational and academic advice, information, and warnings—had some consistency over time.

Resident doors, by contrast, belonged to the informal student culture. Although RAs had affixed a handmade name tag and welcome materials to each of our doors, I quickly learned that cool students added things and, boys in particular, took RA items down. Within three weeks of moving in, 60 percent of the boys' doors had been stripped of their RA materials. It was women, though, at about a 3 to 1 ratio to men, who had designed new, often elaborate door displays.

Although not all students of either gender decorated their doors, expressive door art was a regular feature of college life. A variety of objects, text, drawings, photos, collages, pictures, quotes, comic strips, and symbols—often ten to twenty or more on a single door—appeared as public yet personal door displays. If you were to ask students directly about the rules and meaning of door decoration, they would likely say that there are no rules (except for avoiding racial and ethnic slurs) and that door displays don't "mean" anything beyond the interests of the occupant. An anthropologist, though, would say that there are very particular rules and patterns that define the expressive culture of undergraduates, and the way students choose to represent themselves to others is very telling.

If the formal culture stressed advice, academics, and warnings, informal culture stressed sociability, fun, and humor. "Friendly fun," as Michael Moffatt found at Rutgers University, was "the bread and butter of college life."² In 2003, "fun" continued to be one of the most ubiquitous words in college discourse, a way to describe a good evening, a good person, or a good class. "Fun," as a concept, is associated with spontaneity, sociability, laughter, and behavior (including sexuality) that is unconstrained. The value placed on fun was evident in many forns on student doors, in the images and words that were selected for public viewing.

Probably the most common door display included strings of phrases and words cut from magazines, usually interspersed

with cutout images. Although some doors posted discrete messages such as "Saying of the Week" or "Quotable Quotes," most used a collage-like genre to create a carefully constructed impression of freethinking spontaneity and individuality. On one representative door on my hall were the following phrases:

Friends don't let friends party naked; Bitch; 24 hours in a day. 24 bottles of beer in a case. Coincidence? I think Not; Z-Man!! We Test Animals; Crazy Wild; Where the Stars Go; How Long Should you Wait?

While this reads on one level like a highly individualized, almost stream-of-consciousness expression, it is actually highly stylized. Its cutout words and phrases, set at different angles and using different sizes and fonts of type, were in the same visual style that appeared on most doors. Its content references to booze, nakedness, craziness, youth, celebrity, and sexuality were also common themes, which conveyed even larger themes of freedom and fun. Thus, down the hall on a neighboring door, one could see different phrases, also in pasted cutouts, that were manifestations of the same themes: "Bare your butt," "Young and Royal," "Las Vegas," "A Colorful Character," "Once Upon a Mattress," "The Next Best Thing to Naked," or on the next one "Welcome to CrazyWorld" and "Naked on Roller Skates."

Nudity, sexuality, drinking, craziness. These are certainly part of the college scene, but concentrating on the literal content alone misses the underlying values—fun, expressiveness, individuality, freedom, spontaneity—which are really the point. Images, like words, convey the same few themes. On one door it will be "nakedness" phrases that impart the impression of individuality, fun, a lack of limits; on another the same message is communicated with outdoor sport photos, showing a mountain biker or a skier in mid-air or a surfer riding a giant curling wave.

Acceptable alternative images or text include antiestablishment themes, in which the same core values of individuality

and freedom are directed toward critique and rebellion. These door displays use dark, ghoulish, or frightening images: faces or bodies dripping with blood, Dracula-type/punk/goth images, skull and crossbones, a figure holding an automatic weapon. One such door with "dark" images displayed these verbal messages:

Swaying to the Rhythm of the New World Order; The Boogymen are Coming; Every time you Masturbate, God Kills a Kitten; Sort of; Korn Untouchables; Quit Smoking Later; The Rocky Horror Picture Show; Pay No Mind What Other Voices Say, they don't care about you.

Other acceptable messages are funny, cryptic, or eccentric, like this string of phrases on a single door: "Fight Club," "The Only Good Clown is a Dead Clown," and "Dream, Do you?" Although women and men share most of the expressive themes, friendship and love are, on the average, overrepresented on women's doors, while men's doors more frequently show images of violence, political critique, and humor, particularly in the form of cartoons.

Many of the implicit messages of dorm doors directly contradict those of the formal sector. Whereas careful forethought and the consideration of consequences are primary messages in the formal sector, informal student culture emphasizes spontaneity. Drinking, smoking, drugs, and sexuality, while commonly featured in warnings on bulletin boards and official postings, appear as objects of admiration on student doors. And while official messages wholeheartedly urge students to accept their bodies, the images on student doors are unambiguously young, lean, attractive, buff, and/or voluptuous. When fat, old, or unattractive people appear, they are almost always associated with ridicule and humor, thus reinforcing the inverse message.

Some of the most common images on student doors involve leisure and the "good life"—including martini glasses, palm trees, cowboys, guitars, flowers, bikinis, hearts, Hawaii, belly

dancers, beaches. They offer an alternative to the "buckle down" vision of college in the formal sector, which implores students to apply themselves, to balance their social lives with study and seriousness of purpose. Among the diverse images I observed on student doors, none depicted books, studying, or academic honors—not even to critique them.

At least half of all pictures of people on student doors came from magazines or commercial posters, an indication that pop culture is a primary well from which students draw to construct their public identities. The range of "people images" typically included music, sports, and TV or film celebrities as well as anonymous sexy young men and women, models from ads who were either just "looking good" or engaged in an intense but "fun" activity: snowboarding, skiing, surfing, rock climbing, and cycling to name a few. Men, particularly but not exclusively, posted pictures depicting naked women, beauty queens, lesbian sexuality, and other sexualized women's images that were the objects of both comic and lustful gazes.

The images of "real" people—that is, photographs of the resident and people the resident knew—appeared on several doors, though less frequently than media images. With one exception, in hundreds of images there were no pictures of family members. Images that students chose for their doors were a particular genre of photograph that I can best describe with some examples (I cannot *show* them because of confidentiality requirements):

- The resident on a trip with a group of his friends. They all face the camera with arms outstretched in an "end-of-show" gesture, some on half-bended knees.
- A collage of photos taken during what clearly is a party. In one there are people wall-to-wall, as the resident holds up a glass in a toast.
- The two residents of the room, both making faces at the camera.
- A resident sticking her tongue out at the camera.

- Two residents of the room bending over and sticking out their rear ends (clad in jeans) at the camera.
- A mixed-gender group of friends on the ground, each person's head resting on the next person's stomach. The shot is taken from above, and everyone is laughing.
- The female resident and two girlfriends outdoors, facing the camera, with arms around one another's waist. The girl in the middle opens her mouth in mock surprise as the girls on either side point to her.

The images typically are not serious; they are often posed, but in poses that contrast with the family album picture. Instead of smiling naturally, people are often making faces, or purposely "over"-smiling, or sticking out their tongues. They appear in unusual positions (on the ground; with their butts sticking out) and/or off-balance, with legs and arms akimbo, as if caught in some spontaneous and "fun" activity. The photos almost exclusively feature the resident with others of the same age group.

Many of the photos—just as the words, phrases, and images included—are calculated to say something like: "Here I am doing crazy/spontaneous/'fun' things"; "Here I am having a good time with my friends"; or sometimes, "I'm a unique and eccentric individual." What makes door art, from phrases to images to photos, similar is the spirit and the values it conveys: friendliness, youth, freedom, sexiness, sociability, irreverence, fun, humor, intensity, eccentricity, lack of limits, spontaneity. These are the values of undergraduate life, and although there are many students who do not individually advance or emulate these values, they nonetheless serve as the cultural standard.³

The Absolutely Positively Mandatory First Hall Meeting

My first formal introductions to others on the corridor came in the form of a required corridor meeting, the first of the season.

A few days before, I happened on a group of hall mates in the lounge making signs for the meeting. In addition to advertising, as usual, that "pizza will be provided," the posters included urgent phrases such as "You MUST be there!" "Yes, we mean YOU!" "ABSOLUTELY MANDATORY MEETING."

"See you there," I said in passing, as one of the sign makers glanced up, but he responded that he wasn't looking forward to the meeting and might not go himself. He mocked: "Don't pee on the toilets, don't leave trash in the halls . . . I know what they're going to say. I don't need to hear it again."

"Yeah," said another sign maker to both of us, "but we wanna show support for our RA for the first meeting, so we probably *will* be there."

Not all corridor residents did show up, but the lounge still could not hold the fifty-plus men and women who arrived for the first meeting; the overflow sat in the doorways, draped themselves over the arms of couches, and squeezed into tiny open spots on the floor. As an icebreaker the RAs asked us to tell two things about ourselves that others would probably not know from meeting us. I was one of the first to go and mentioned that I had lived overseas in a remote place for a few years; others mentioned musical talents or double-jointedness, but most people reverted to departmental major, name, and hometown. No one ever asked me about the place where I'd lived or why I'd lived there.

After introductions we moved on to rules, such as "Don't take the screens out of your windows" and "Don't prop the outside doors open." Those of us with no roommate were directed to move all our things to one side of the room unless we had paid for a single room. This portion of the meeting was not terribly different from that envisioned by the sign makers. We were then asked what dorm activities we'd like to have this year, to a lackluster response.

Finally, the meeting turned to the subject of alcohol. Although I didn't openly take notes, the discussion went something like this. "If you're not twenty-one, you can't buy alcohol," the RA began.

"Hey, who on the floor is over twenty-one?" a resident asked to laughter as the "over twenty-ones" enthusiastically raised their hands to show the underage students who could buy liquor for them.

"Listen," said the male RA, "the RHD [residence hall director] is really serious about that—he'll turn you in to the police if it comes out that you bought liquor for anyone underage. But, hey, we're not here to bust your butt. We're not here to catch you at anything. So don't give us reason to. Like I said, if you're underage, it is illegal to drink, but if you're in your own room, and you've got your door shut, and you're not loud, and no one's getting sick—well, we have no reason to go in there. Get the message?"

We certainly did. This dual message was, I found, the primary way that student authority was expressed within college culture, and perhaps with the exception of those living in freshmen-only dorms, this speech was consistent with the experiences of most students. I also found the same pattern mentioned in literature about other universities.⁴ "Bad" RAs enforced the letter of the law; "good" ones enforced what we students believed to be its spirit.

Besides RAs, the only authority figure ever mentioned in dorm meetings was the residence hall director, and a student saw the RHD only if there was a problem or an issue that needed handling. Unless one did something outrageous or un-luckily public, most of student life flew under the radar of university-level authorities, whom, as in Moffatt's day, few students could even name. The deans, provosts, and vice presidents, so important to faculty, remained part of an amorphous university structure that had little to do with students unless they really bungled their lives. In college culture the rules are perceived to come from "outside," and it was the job of an astute college student to keep his or her real life private and "inside," certainly behind closed doors.

That first all-hall meeting would be the last dorm meeting that more than a handful of people attended—even the absolutely positively mandatory ones.

School Days

My first week of college, before classes began, fit my idealized sense of college life. There was a buzz of activity as we all unpacked and began putting our rooms and door displays together. I watched carefully, realizing that most students were hanging message boards outside their doors that could record greetings, questions, and invitations from others who came by to visit when they were out. I bought and hung my own message board, realizing that, like dorm doors generally, it too served as a symbol—of friendliness and perhaps, when filled with messages, one's popularity.

During the day, dorm room doors were left wide open, as people unpacked and rearranged, and there was an animated life to the halls. The sights and sounds on my corridor were most vibrant in the evenings: one girl rolling another in a laundry basket down the hall to accompanying peals of laughter; someone drunk and sick throwing up in the girls' bathroom; two guys skateboarding illegally in the corridor; a bass thumping from one of the boys' rooms that shook the entire corridor; and the continual beeps from the boys' hall of XBX video game players who had shot one of the enemy.

There was a stream of social activities—a movie; a game night; an ice cream social; a bonfire and concert on the square, which most of the RAs attended and actively solicited us to join. One night I was the official spinner for the lobby game of Twister, which we played until we couldn't determine a winner. On another night I joined a group watching a video in the RA's room, contributing my plate of oozing microwaved eggrolls to the bags of microwaved popcorn already popped for the occasion. Together, propped on floor pillows, we watched a video about a man who loses his wife, a doctor, in an accident and finds another, a waitress, who received his wife's heart in a transplant. Although I had never encountered this film anywhere, it was apparently a cherished standby for most in attendance, who had seen it multiple times.

I spent one fascinating evening that I didn't fully understand. For more than two hours I watched five students set up a scenario for a role-playing game, an exceedingly complex contemporary iteration of Dungeons and Dragons. Among the activities laid down by the game leader was a random name generator that, on one of its runs, put together "academic title" words into new combinations, generating results such as "theoretical psychological anthropologist," "applied philosophical mathematician," and "critical historical sociologist." While I was chuckling to myself that these weren't far from the jargon that academics invent, one of the students commented that "these titles are as bogus as what we are actually doing here," to murmurs of agreement.

Then classes started. The planned daily activities ended and RA attentiveness waned. People retreated to their own lives and insular social groups, and real dorm life, as I would come to know it, began.

The start of classes brought a whole new slate of contacts and relationships, and it also ushered in a new set of daily responsibilities and realities. To get a sense of the rhythms of people's lives, I did my best to observe carefully the comings and goings on my own hall. As schedules became more regularized, I had hoped to perceive the shape of undergraduate days and nights.

This proved an elusive task because of the nature of our lives as students. Bombarded with lists of books to get (or return) and first assignments, I found it hard enough to keep track of my own life, let alone the activities of numerous others. I began to feel as harried as my fellow students as I located my rescheduled classrooms, met my professors, and began feeling the pressing demands of homework. My daily journal included entries that reminded me of my high school diary, filled with anxieties about deadlines and frustrations over mundane events: "Had to return to the bookstore four times (!) because professors subtracted or added books!"; "Bought my day planner but no time to fill it in"; "Went to three different buildings before I found my freshman seminar class."

My hall mates were like ships that passed in the night, greeting one another cursorily as we came back and forth from classes. Dorm life continued to be friendly, and I regularly inquired, as did my fellow students, about hall mates' days and classes. "How was your first week of college?" one boyfriend of a neighbor asked in amusement as I walked down the hall.

"Overwhelming," I responded.

"It gets better," he assured me.

"Did anybody make it to all their classes?" someone else asked a group of four. Only one person admitted she did.

Somehow, though, I had expected students' lives to be more public, more like my first week in the dorms, and for students to be involved with dorm mates in a number of joint events. I found that much more of student life than I had initially thought occurred behind closed doors and was not amenable to my participation or observation. As I would realize later on, these initial experiences reflected more than methodological problems; they pointed, as will become clear in this chapter, to some central themes in contemporary college life.

It wasn't until my own life as a student had settled more, and I began to do interviews and collect time diaries from other students, that I would begin to notice the patterns and patterned variations in student life.⁵ It took even longer still to understand the forces behind the patterns.

Some things about college life had probably not changed that much since the 1970s, when Moffatt initially collected data about students at Rutgers University. His student sample, like mine, slept about eight hours a day and attended classes or dealt with university bureaucracy about four hours per day during the week. In his data, two-thirds studied about two hours a day, 10 to 15 percent worked harder than that, and 25 percent studied hardly at all, usually cramming at exam time.⁶

National samples of students suggest that class preparation time in 2003 was about the same, or, if anything, had slightly eroded. Forty-five percent of seniors in the United States (and 43 percent of freshmen) reported spending between one and

ten hours per seven-day week preparing for class—well under two hours a day—while 20 percent worked more than twenty hours (with 11 percent reporting more than twenty-five hours per week), and the rest somewhere in between.⁷

These statistics roughly jibe with my own student reports. In the twenty days of student diaries I collected, the median daily class preparation time was about an hour and forty-five minutes (two hours if you use the average), or twelve and a quarter hours per week, a figure that included studying, reading, doing research, and writing papers, as well as watching class videos and meeting with project groups. The variation from day to day, though, was notable. While one-third of the time, students put in one hour or less of daily course preparation, they put in four or more hours on one out of every five days.

So if students are studying a little less, are they relaxing and partying more? The answer, despite the rhetoric of student culture, is no. Moffatt's students relaxed and socialized an estimated four hours per day. Only 12 percent of seniors and 17 percent of freshmen in the 2003 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) reported relaxing or socializing even *three* or more hours a day. Sixty percent of seniors nationwide, and 53 percent of freshmen, said that they relaxed or socialized between one and ten hours per week, decidedly less than two hours per day. Even if one assumes, as I do, that these national surveys—which ask students to reflect on an entire week and self-report—are flawed, I also saw a relative dearth of "down time" when I totaled the minutes spent in various activities from the more reliable daily diary logs. In my own hall sample, the median number of hours spent socializing or relaxing was 2.88 hours a day,⁸ down considerably from Moffatt's observations in the 1970s and 1980s.

The data suggested then that, compared to students a couple of decades ago, today's public college students are both studying a little less and socializing less. What, then, are they doing with their "extra" time?

According to my local sample, students were first and foremost working jobs, both inside and outside the university.

Whereas Moffatt reported that one of eight of his sampled students was working, more than half of my sample had a wage-paying job, working from six to over twenty-five hours, with a median of fifteen hours, every week. The NSSE survey for 2003 confirmed the huge upswing in students at work nationwide, finding that 31 percent of freshmen and a whopping 56 percent of seniors held some kind of *off-campus* paying job. And many more students worked on campus. In total, two-thirds of all students were working, including 54 percent of first-year students and 88 percent of seniors. Nationally, full-time students worked an average of ten hours per week.

My AnyU sample called attention to some other changes in time use as well. Although extracurricular clubs and organizations were not a central focus of student activity in either Moffatt's study or my own,⁹ my interviews with students about their extracurricular participation showed that about half of those in my sample were involved in professional clubs and in volunteer work. I mention these in the same breath because I learned from interviews that joining professional clubs and volunteering are related. As one junior, Kate, explained to me:

As a freshman I joined the pre-vet club and then last year I joined my professional Honor Society, which meets every other Thursday. Both of them require community service hours—which it's really important to have for vet school. That's why we [the organization's membership] do volunteer hours and fundraisers for community causes—the group helps us to beef up our résumés, and this helps us professionally when we apply to schools.

Many students who spoke with me viewed clubs and community work with this same eye for career. In a group of thirteen students whom I had interviewed about club participation, six were currently members of a professional group, most requiring community service, while only two participated in sports groups, two at some level of student government or politics, and one in a religious group. Personal interest clubs were

noticeably lacking. Although sports and fitness interests ran high, many in the sample had declined to join a group and instead worked out at the gym either individually or with a friend. Kyle had participated in a poetry slam group, Deb had joined a campus booster/guide program, and Kate had attended a karate club, but all had grown too busy to continue. It was these groups that were sacrificed in students' participation histories, with only one student maintaining a multiyear membership in a group focused on her personal interests.

For half of the six ethnic minorities in my interview sample, an ethnic-based club or professional organization was important in their lives, and although their degree of participation waned and waxed in some semesters, these groups were an enduring presence over their college career.

By listing and aggregating the activities named in students' daily diaries, one could see that only about fifty types of activities—which included eating, socializing, napping, walking to class, going on-line, watching TV and videos, working out, studying or doing homework, listening to music, playing video games, and attending meetings—accounted for most of what students do in a given week. Students typically "multitasked": many went on-line while they ate or chatted on the cell phone while walking to class or did homework while watching TV.

It might surprise parents to learn that on a typical weeknight, more than half of dorm residents were in bed by 11:30 PM, and most were up the next morning by 9 AM.¹⁰ The real experience of "college life," though, was in the variation—the sense that it was also considered normal to stay up past 2 AM or to awaken after noon. One-quarter of the time, sampled hall mates stayed up after 1 AM (several after 3 AM), and 15 percent of the time, students slept past noon, even on a weekday. Thus, college culture included the comical and ubiquitous ringing of alarm clocks at 2:00 in the afternoon, just as it did an abiding tolerance for those whose schedules are the inverse of one's own.

A typical week was thus very different for different students. Whereas the ROTC students were up before 6 AM to fit in their training commitments, and kept their evening outings to a min-

imum, the sorority pledge was out late both nights recorded in her diary log and confided that because of sorority commitments, there were many weeks when she had four late nights of obligations. She slept in past noon when she could. The varsity runner on the floor could almost never attend an outside dorm or university event in the evening; between his classes, daily morning and evening workouts, and weekend track meets, the only time he could study was weekday evenings.

All ten of the students I followed closely had constructed lives so distinct that their paths would cross only with great effort. It is no wonder that I had difficulty discerning the rhythm of the typical student day, as you can see in just these brief portraits of four students on my hall.

Casey is up at 5 AM most days because of ROTC training, which she admits is the biggest part of her life. Despite this daily commitment, she also remains active in a professional club and a demanding multicultural leadership program. Casey dropped her meal plan because she no longer had time to eat, and adds that she thought about joining a sorority but felt that "if I added that to my plate, I couldn't finish it." What social life she has centers on other ROTC students, including her roommate, whose schedules have more in common with her own. She typically eats alone in her dorm room whenever there's a break—mostly ramen noodles and microwave food—and finds that she has to extend her day past the bedtime she'd like in order to finish studying.

Ossie's days are longer, too, but for different reasons. An ethnic minority like Casey, Ossie, by his own admission, has become a terrible procrastinator—more lax and relaxed than in high school days. "One of the reasons is that I'm not sure what I want to do," he says. "I've changed my major seven times." Because of this he has had to go to school in the summer to stay on track, and his biggest challenge in college is keeping up with classes. "I stay at the university because of my friends—if it wasn't for them I'd be at a different school." Ossie likes to get out and socialize at least three nights a week. As he describes it, "I also like to keep busy," so in addition to his school and social

life, Ossie works over twenty-five hours a week, which provides money for food and his nights out. Ossie's schedule leaves no time for clubs or interest groups.

Cynthia shared a class with me which she regularly "ditched." It is a matter, she explains, of priorities. She is an art major, and very serious about her art, which takes up most of her time. In addition to her heavy studio schedule, Cynthia works—both on campus, at an office, and off campus, at a local bar. Between her classes, her art, and her jobs, there is little time for much else. She stopped her regular attendance at two student groups she had joined and admits, "I don't see friends a lot. My social life is my [bar] job." Aside from a close roommate from high school, the only other friends she sees are people in her art classes. She eats irregularly, by her admission, whenever she can fit it in, and so she passed on a meal ticket: "I have to remind myself, 'Don't forget to eat!'" She estimates that she gets only five or six hours of sleep because she doesn't start studying until 10 PM when she's not working in the bar.

As a committed Christian, Kyle has a well-rounded life that centers on a small but close set of friends who are deeply involved in his church. A good student, Kyle apportions part of every week day for studying. He has learned to treat school like a nine-to-five job, and between those hours he attends class and tries to fit in all his reading, papers, and preparation. This is purposeful so that nights and weekends are free for Kyle's social, church, and volunteer activities. With others in his circle, he volunteers at a food bank and visits the elderly two nights a week; he spends two out of every three weekends away at religious retreats or outreach programs. He has chosen to live with and close to other members of the Christian community, and they try to have an evening meal or tea with one another at least twice a week. Kyle has a meal ticket, as do some others of his group, and they often buy meals for those in their circle without a ticket so that they can all eat together.

On one level, the diverse student lifestyles described here are simply attributable to choices emanating from differences in individual agendas and personality. From a cultural standpoint,

though, it is clear that while people everywhere are different, the social structures in which they live do not always give free rein to those differences. Daily college routines, and the huge variation in the shape of days from student to student, was really a manifestation of something deeper about the nature of the university. Beneath differences in daily routine was a set of decisions that students made, and underlying their decisions was a set of options built in to AnyU and in to the structure of the American university. Would the students major in A or B or Z? Go to Spanish class, section 1 or section 10? Would they live on campus or off? In dorm X or dorm Y? Would they sign up for a meal plan or eat in their room? Would they spend most weekends away? Would they get a job while they went to school? Do volunteer work? Join ROTC? Would they pledge a fraternity or sorority?

In many ways, the microcosm of my corridor explained much about my experience of college life, and about why the national cries for "community" in the American college go unanswered.¹¹ It is hard to create community when the sheer number of options in college life generate a system in which no one is in the same place at the same time.

This is less a feature of intentional academic policy than it is of the premium Americans place on individuality and choice coupled with basic mathematics. If one hundred people make one choice, such as dorm A or dorm B, then, assuming the options are equally attractive, fifty people will be dorm A mates while fifty will live together in dorm B. But say, then, that the same fifty people in each dorm choose from one of five majors and one of three meal plans. How many have made the same choices and are likely to be in the same dining area, dorm, and major classes? Just three of the original one hundred, and that takes into account only this limited range of options. If we allow people to choose from one hundred majors, and add in decisions like being in a fraternity, going out for a sport, or living off campus, we can see that even with the thousands of students at a state university, very few students will have created college paths that cross frequently. Even good friends who have

chosen to live together will have different majors, different courses, different clubs, and jobs that define divergent paths in their day-to-day lives.

Two implications follow from what can be called our "over-optional" public university system. The first is that there is little that is automatically shared among people by virtue of attending the same university. On a practical level, what this means is that friends won't normally take the same classes; classmates won't usually go home to the same dorm; and hall mates won't often eat together, because some have meal plans while others buy their own food. It thus takes forethought and effort to overlap with others or to build a social circle, and the people who "naturally" meet (i.e., by virtue of having the same commitments) are most likely to be those who are glaringly alike.

The second implication is that, despite the emphasis on community, one can easily opt to move out of the dorm, drop the class, change majors, or quit the club, resulting in a social world that always seems to be in flux. The university "community" becomes both elusive and unreliable. When I came back to visit my dorm the semester after I finished my project, I could not find one person on my old corridor whom I recognized. "What happened?" I asked incredulously when I found one familiar RA face on a different floor. "Everyone moved. I think there's only one person from last year still on your corridor." I had seen 10 percent of my dorm population change by the time my first semester ended and 25 percent by the third week of my second semester.¹² One year later it was clear that, at least in university housing, one could never "go home." I shouldn't have been so surprised, really, because in a system in which one can choose from a number of living arrangements at any time, people do choose, and choose again.

The same is true of most aspects of university life. Thus, in my very small sample, the majority of students I interviewed had had at least two different majors, switching from one to seven times. Most also had joined and left at least one organization or club, quitting because the organization no longer ap-

pealed to them or the meeting bumped heads with another, more important activity.

In this light, the university becomes, for individual students, an optional set of activities and a fluid set of people whose paths are ever-shifting. Seen from the level of the institution, "community" is a lofty ideal but with few common activities, rituals, or even symbols to bind together its diverse inhabitants. What little one might share with some other students—a major, a residence hall, an interest—is always in flux. How this plays out for two of the most touted values of university life, community and diversity, is the subject of the next chapter.